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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CAIRO 005447

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SUBJECT: DEPUTY SECRETARY ZOELLICK'S JULY 13, 2005 MEETING
WITH EGYPTIAN OPPOSITION PARTY FIGURES AND POLITICAL
ANALYSTS

Classified by: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) July 13, 2005; 2:30 p.m.; Cairo, Egypt

2. (U) Participants:

U.S.

The Deputy Secretary
Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin
PDAS Elizabeth Cheney
Deputy Spokesman J. Adam Ereli
D Executive Assistant Ross Wilson
D Special Assistant Eugenia Sidereas
Ian McCary (Embassy Cairo Notetaker)

Egypt

Osama El-Ghazali Harb, Shura Council Member
Mahmoud Abaza, Wafd Party
Nagui El-Ghatrifi, Ghad Party
Ismail Serageldin, Director, Alexandria Library
Bahey Eddin Ibrashy, Attorney
Abdel Moneim Said, Al Ahran Center for Strategic Studies
Hassan Sawaf, Businessman and Commentator
Hisham Kassem, Publisher and Ghad Party official
Hoda Badran, Alliance of Arab Women

3. (C) Summary: In a 70-minute meeting, the Deputy Secretary heard a range of views on the state of political reform, the outlook for the elections, and the role the U.S. should play in promoting democracy from a group of nine Egyptians drawn from opposition parties, civil society organizations, and think tanks. There was praise for Secretary Rice's June 20 speech at the American University of Cairo, debate over how the GOE should deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, disagreement also over the value of conditionalizing assistance, and some doubts expressed over the long term commitment of the U.S. to promote democracy in the region. Thanking the group for sharing their views, Deputy Secretary Zoellick noted that the USG recognizes that it does not have all the answers, and understands that changes must come from within societies and cannot be successfully imposed from abroad. At the same time, he continued, the U.S. believes there are many ways it can help promote democracy in the region, and assured his guests that they should not doubt U.S. resolve on this matter, a point echoed by PDAS Cheney. End summary.

4. (C) Welcoming his guests to the Embassy residence, Deputy Secretary Zoellick offered condolences on the recent murder

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of Ambassador Ihab el-Sheriff, Egypt's envoy to Iraq. He noted that in a meeting the day before, Iraqi Prime Minister Jaffari underlined the importance Baghdad assigns to strengthening its relationship with Egypt. The Deputy Secretary affirmed USG interest in recent political

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developments inside Egypt, said that President Mubarak's decision to open the political process had been an important first step, and believed that the coming months will be important for the country's future direction over the long term. He solicited their thoughts and advice on what the U.S. should look for and expect in the lead up to elections this fall.

S AUC Speech on the Right Track

5. (C) Nagui El-Ghatrifi of the Ghad Party complimented Secretary Rice's June 20 speech at the American University of

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Cairo (AUC) and opined that her remarks compared favorably with the report on democratic change in Egypt issued earlier this spring by former Congressman Weber and former Secretary Albright. The latter report, Ghatrifi opined, put too much emphasis on the GOE's preconditions for reform - it must be gradual, it cannot be in response to outside pressure, etc. - while Secretary Rice's speech emphasized what democracy advocates expect of the GOE - to allow political parties to campaign without harassment, to invite international observers, to conduct transparent elections, etc. The U.S.

approach, as reflected in the Secretary's speech at AUC, was on target, he believed.

----- Institutionalizing Reform -----

16. (C) Bahey Eddin Ibrashy, an attorney and board member of Egypt's Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies, believed that the key to advancing political reform in Egypt was in allowing democracy advocates to institutionalize and conduct their activities in a free manner. He opined that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), "the only political force in Egypt that has a strong base in society," should be allowed, under certain circumstances, to operate as a legal entity. This would enable the MB to become a player in a democratic system and make its policies more moderate and responsible.

17. (C) Hisham Kassem, a publisher and Ghad Party official, wondered why Ibrashy stressed the need to lift restrictions only on the MB. Other political parties, which operate as legal entities now, are nonetheless not allowed to engage freely in political activities. The GOE's relentless harassment of the Ghad Party is prime example, he asserted. The reason the MB is strong, Kassem continued, is that the GOE has shut down other avenues for political activity. The only platforms remaining have been the regime and the mosque. Extending legitimacy to the MB would be dangerous and counterproductive if it did not come in the context of a broader opening of the political system, Kassem stressed.

----- Conditionality: Pros and Cons -----

18. (C) Hassan Sawaf, a businessman and commentator strongly critical of the GOE, asserted that U.S. assistance to Egypt, in the past three decades, has had an "insidious effect" in shoring up a government he characterized as composed of "thugs and bandits." Sawaf opined that Congressman Lantos' proposal to cut U.S. assistance to Egypt did not go far enough. If the U.S. is serious about realizing political reform, Sawaf believed, it should tell Mubarak that unless the GOE makes dramatic improvements, such as lifting the Emergency Law, the U.S. will simply cut off its aid. "Doing anything less would be a waste of time," he concluded.

19. (C) Ismail Serageldin, Director of the Alexandria Library, took strong exception to Sawaf's approach. Conditionality on assistance always yields a tangible increase in resentment, without tangible gains, he asserted. The challenge of changing an entrenched regime is not a unique phenomenon to Egypt, Serageldin continued, the PRI ruled Mexico for over 70 years before seeing successful change. The only effective agent of change is a vibrant civil society, the presence or absence of which helps explain the differences between northern and southern Italy, he observed. Egypt's civil society remains weak, Serageldin lamented, even in comparison with other developing countries like India. Building a vibrant civil society will bring about long term change in Egypt, he asserted. Twenty-eight years at the World Bank had taught him that meaningful change in societies comes from within.

110. (C) Abdel Moneim Said of the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies echoed Serageldin's rejection of conditionality for assistance. He was optimistic that this year would see further democratic developments, noting a newly issued court decision that may advance the moderate Islamist Wasat Party's chances for legal recognition. He also noted that this year a "legitimate" coalition of Egyptian civil society organizations has been formed to monitor the elections, and he predicted that domestic election monitors would encounter significantly less resistance than they have in previous elections. Egypt's top priority, Said opined, was to make this fall's elections as clean and open as possible. He also hoped Egypt's leaders would encourage more public debate on critical but neglected issues, such as the relationship between the state and religion, and the residue of socialist governance structures, like a quota system for "peasants" and "workers" in parliament.

----- Egypt's Unique History -----

111. (C) Mahmoud Abaza of the Wafd Party welcomed Serageldin's comparative approach in analyzing Egypt's conditions, but emphasized Egypt's "specific and unique history." Egypt's institutions of democratic governance, like its parliaments and court systems, predate any others in the world outside Europe and North America, he asserted. The debate over the nature of governance in Egypt is not new, Abaza observed, history must not be ignored if progress is to be realized. Although Egypt's tradition of political pluralism has withered in recent decades, he stated, the people must be brought back into the process. Egyptians must take advantage

of existing institutions, like its independent press, and work to restore the rule of law. A new "modus operandi" for realizing democratic change must be forged, Abaza continued, but it must not result in a (destructive) revolution.

12. (C) Regarding the MB, Abaza recalled that his Wafd Party has been involved in a long-term dialogue with them. The MB must clarify its positions on key issues, in order to move beyond its current stalemate with the GOE, he asserted. They must clarify whether they truly aspire to political party status, whether they are willing to abandon positions inconsistent with democracy, and how they propose to relate to their international organization. The reason the GOE is not reforming itself is simple, Abaza offered: it is a one party system, with a fusing of party and state, and a president with almost unlimited powers presiding over one of the oldest bureaucracies in the world. The best hope for changing this situation, Abaza believed, is to allow a truly representative parliament to emerge from a "correct electoral process."

Arab Women, the MB, and Assistance

13. (C) Hoda Badran of the Alliance for Arab Women expressed concern that the U.S. sent confusing and inconsistent signals about its commitment to promoting democracy in the region. Sometimes USG officials appear to be taking a strong line on democracy with Arab governments and sometimes they appear willing to accept gradualism and half-measures. Regarding the MB, Badran expressed apprehension, as a woman, about the impact on social development of a greater political role for Islamists. Badran affirmed that she sided with those who opposed conditionality in assistance, which she believed complicated issues with no clear benefit. Assistance is provided on the basis of solidarity, not charity, she asserted.

Questions on U.S. Commitment

14. (C) Gehad Ouda, a dean of Helwan University and a prolific writer, worried that the issue of democracy may prove to have a "short shelf life" in Egypt. Recent modifications to laws governing political life were not encouraging, he opined. Liberals in Egypt must find ways to bridge the gap between intellectuals and the masses and establish structures that can support the political reform process. Ouda added that the U.S., like any country, must balance its ideals, like spreading democracy, against its more narrow national interests. While striking such a balance is legitimate, Ouda opined, "we do not have clear sign posts and we do not know what the parameters are." Ouda hoped that the U.S. agenda from promoting freedom and democracy in the Arab world would be more clearly defined.

15. (C) Ossama El-Ghazaly Harb, a Shura council member, believed that Egypt is witnessing an historic moment that could yield dramatic changes. Egyptian advocates of democracy, however, were worrying about the level of U.S. determination to stand behind this cause. Referencing Deputy Secretary Zoellick's recent visit to Sudan, Harb believed it

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telling that dramatic changes to Sudan's political structure were taking place due to a combination of both internal and external factors.

An American View

16. (C) Deputy Secretary Zoellick responded that he took note of the concern and questions about the USG's long term commitment to promoting democratic change in the Arab world. He said such questioning is inevitable, but it would not deter us. The U.S. does not have all the answers, and we recognize that we must respect what we do not know as well as what we do know. The Deputy Secretary agreed that conditionality generally does not work and can sometimes backfire. The U.S. is also sensitive to the fact that circumstances vary significantly from country to country and that ultimately decisions leading to change must be made locally if there is to be ownership of the change.

17. (C) While some continue to believe that the prospect of democratic transition in the region will prove to be a "false dawn," many others are indicating a real sense of change, the Deputy Secretary observed. Significant developments, such as the issuance of the Alexandria Declaration, the Arab Human Development Report, and the candid assessments of Egypt's new National Human Rights Council were indicators of this change, he added. The U.S. recognizes its limitations, but also believes it can take steps to assist regional transition, for

example by stimulating debate and by offering assistance, direct and indirect, to local agents of democratic change. The U.S. will pay close attention to Egypt's electoral processes this year, he continued, recognizing that this fall's legislative elections are of particular significance to the country's direction in the coming years. There is reason to hope, he added, that the democratic transition will take on a momentum of its own, the Deputy Secretary opined. The U.S. will be watching for signs of improvement in the conduct of Egypt's elections, the Deputy Secretary continued, noting the freedom to campaign and organize without harassment as key indicators.

19. (C) PDAS Cheney added her thanks to the group and stressed that Egyptians should not doubt the USG's strong commitment to promoting democracy and freedom in the region. President Bush has been as direct and clear on this subject as any U.S. President ever has been, she added. Referring to concerns about the consistency in tone of USG statements, PDAS Cheney urged the Egyptians "to watch what we do as much as what we say."

20. (U) Deputy Secretary Zoellick has cleared this message.

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